

James Hamlyn Willis 1910-1995

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With the sudden death of James Hamlyn Willis D. Sc., AM on 10 November 1995 The Field Naturalists Club of Victoria lost one of its long-standing and most revered members, known to us all simply as Jim. Above all, those whose lives had touched Jim in any way, however small, felt that they had lost a friend. His cheerful personality, friendly greetings and wise counsel illuminated and enriched any gathering in which he participated.

Jim was born in Oakleigh on 28 January 1910, the second son of Benjamin James Willis, then a teller in the Bank of Australasia (now the ANZ Bank) at Yarram. In 1913 Benjamin Willis was promoted to manage the bank's branch in Stanley, Tasmania, where Jim had his early schooling, first from his father and then at the local primary school. In 1924, at the age of fourteen, Jim came to Melbourne to attend Melbourne High School. After matriculating in 1927 he was awarded a three year scholarship to the Victorian School of Forestry at Creswick. After receiving his Diploma in 1930 he was posted back to the Creswick district as a cadet Field Officer with the Forests Commission.

It was in Creswick that Jim met his future wife Mavis Howie. During October 1932 Jim was appointed Assistant Forest Officer at Belgrave and a year later, on 13 October 1933, he and Mavis were married and went to live at Cockatoo.

Jim was elected a country member of The Field Naturalists Club of Victoria in December 1932 and in April 1934 his first papers appeared in *The Victorian Naturalist*. Entitled 'The Agaricaceae or Gilled Fungi', 'Beef Steak', 'Punk' and 'Blackfellows Bread' these papers filled the whole of Part 12 of Volume 50 and aroused a great deal of interest. A note in the July 1934 issue refers to the demand for reprints of the April issue; more than

600 copies were required to fill orders from Melbourne Teachers Training College and Melbourne University Botany School, as well as orders from overseas institutions. These papers formed the basis of a book entitled *Victorian Fungi* published by the Club in 1941. It was reprinted in 1950 with the new title of *Victorian Toadstools and Mushrooms*. Further reprints appeared in 1957 and 1963.

Jim led his first Club excursion on 30 May 1934 - a 'Fungus Foray' to Cockatoo Creek (June 1934, *The Victorian Naturalist* 51, 45-48). This was the first of many such excursions and the 'Fungus Foray' became a regular event in the Club's calendar.

In 1937 Jim negotiated a transfer from the Forests Commission to the Lands Department and in October 1937 began his distinguished career with the Royal Botanic Gardens and National Herbarium which lasted until his retirement in 1972 when he held the position of Assistant Government Botanist and Acting Director of the Royal Botanic Gardens and National Herbarium.

Shortly after Jim began work in Melbourne the Willis family moved to Brighton and Jim commenced part-time study at Melbourne University, graduating in April 1940 with the degree of B. Sc. (Hons.). The move to Melbourne enabled Jim to take a more active part in the Club. On 20 November 1937 he led his first general excursion to the Frankston area with Ethel McLennan as joint leader (Jan. 1938, *The Victorian Naturalist* 54, 144) and in July 1938 he gave his first talk to the Club entitled 'The Alluring World of Fungi', illustrated 'by many colourful lantern slides and projections by the epidiascope'. A large collection of fungi was also displayed contributed by J.H. Willis, H.C.E. Stewart and A.A. Brunton (July 1938, *The Victorian Naturalist* 55, 38).

Following his retirement in 1972 Jim was able to travel more widely and many

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of these trips became the subject of talks illustrated with his slides. The lecture hall was always well filled on these occasions and the audience was assured of hearing well chosen words, clearly spoken and audible throughout the hall without amplification. Apart from speaking at Club meetings Jim was in constant demand as a speaker on a wide variety of topics to other groups and societies in Melbourne as well as in country Victoria and interstate. One of his last talks was delivered on 13 October 1986 to the Botany Group of the Club, when he spoke for one and a half hours on his trip to China.

Jim held several official positions in the Club; the first as a Committee member in 1941-43; Council member 1974-76; Vice-President 1944, 1971-72 and 1973-74; acting Editor of *The Victorian Naturalist* for 6 months from July 1945, Assistant Editor 1947-48 and Editor 1948-51. He was a member of the Plant Names Subcommittee from 1943 and its Secretary 1948-1957 and a member of the Natural History Medallion Award Committee in the 1960's and again in 1973-76.

A master of the written as well as the spoken word, Jim contributed articles on a variety of subjects to *The Victorian Naturalist* as well as to numerous Australian and overseas journals and local suburban publications. Apart from botanical subjects Jim was a knowledgeable historian and wrote widely about early Australian explorers and botanists. His published works numbered over 800 including 452 individual botanical and biographical entries in *The Australian Encyclopedia* (1958). Over 200 of his papers appeared in *The Victorian Naturalist* and he took a modest pride in having published more papers there than anyone else. In the first 21 years after moving to Melbourne he published 150 papers of which all but 25 appeared in *The Victorian Naturalist*.

As well as *Victorian Toadstools and Mushrooms* Jim was author or co-author of three other books and published major revisions of two others. *A Handbook to Plants in Victoria* Vol.1 (1962), 2nd edn. (1973) and Volume 2 (1972) were land-

marks in his publishing career. They were the first comprehensive publications on the Victorian flora since A.J. Ewart's long outdated *Flora of Victoria* (1931). The two handbooks formed the major part of his thesis presented to Melbourne University for which he received a Doctorate of Science in 1974. In 1968 *Flowers and Plants of Victoria* (in collaboration with R. Cochrane, E. Rotherham and B. Fuhrer) was published in association with the Field Naturalists Club of Victoria. The captions to the 543 plates in the book were entirely Jim's work. The royalties from the book made a major contribution to the Club's publishing fund. In 1975, after his retirement, Jim revised *Ferns of Victoria and Tasmania* by N.A. Wakefield, another Club publication. In 1982 *Shrubs and trees for Australian Gardens* by the late E.E. Lord, revised 5th edn. by J.H. Willis was published.

Jim was a great lover of nature in all its aspects, he delighted in any activity which took him outdoors and into the countryside. He was a tireless walker and even in the city he never lost an opportunity of walking through the parks. If business took him from the Herbarium to the City he preferred to walk through the parks rather than take a tram. He participated in an enormous range of botanical and exploratory trips throughout Victoria and various parts of every Australian state, to New Guinea and New Zealand. After his retirement he travelled with Mavis in Great Britain, Europe, Iceland and China. At the age of 81 he made a memorable trip to Borneo where he completed the arduous walk almost to the summit of Mt. Kinabalu. He was very disappointed that, due to shortness of breath, he was restrained from attempting the last short, rocky scramble to the summit.

Jim never drove a car, he did his forestry work first by bicycle and later on horse back. He continued to ride his bicycle to work from Brighton to the Herbarium until 1960 when Mavis became worried about his safety in the increasing traffic. The lack of a car did not affect his ability to get out on bush trips; to take Jim as passenger was a sought after pleasure:

his wide knowledge of history and local history as well as botany made him a most entertaining and informative passenger.

In the early 1980's some of the more active Club members felt the need for botanical and general interest weekend camps which would provide more opportunity for walking and exploring than was available on the usual day trips by car or bus. At first these (Five Good Camp-outs, 1985, *The Victorian Naturalist* 102, 5, 167-177), were organised by John Milligan and subsequently by Will Ashburner. Jim, often accompanied by Mavis, was an enthusiastic participant. Usually the first astir in the mornings he would have returned by breakfast time with a little bag of botanical specimens to be discussed and usually pressed for donation to the Herbarium. Jim always travelled with a small bundle of newspaper and, as a passenger mindful of space limits in a companion's car, would often travel sitting on his bundle of pressings. His collecting notes were always clearly written in his beautiful handwriting on the smallest scraps of recycled paper; as a true conservationist nothing was wasted and it is doubtful if a search of his many collections in the Herbarium would reveal that he ever used new paper for his notes. Jim also had a keen sense of smell and taste and both were often employed as an aid to identification of plants.

Jim had a wide range of hobbies and interests apart from botany; he was an avid collector of almost anything unusual or interesting, including books, minerals, shells, coins and postage stamps featuring plant life. He was an accomplished pianist and had a fine baritone voice. He sang in the choir and was a local preacher with the Methodist Church (now the Uniting Church) near his home in Brighton. He spoke French and German and, with the aid of a dictionary and elementary grammar taught himself Latin and Welsh. He also had some knowledge of Icelandic.

The name of James Hamlyn Willis is perpetuated in eight plants named after him:

Acacia jamesiana Maslin (from Great Victoria Desert to Yalgoo and Wiluna);
Epilobium willisii Raven and Engelhorn

(from sub-alpine Victoria and Tasmania);

Eucalyptus willisii Ladiges, Humphries and Brooker (from SA and Victoria);

Goodenia willisiana Carolin (from SA, NSW and Victoria);

Grevillea willisii R.V. Smith and McGillivray (from north-east Victoria).

Oleanites willisii I. Cookson (a fossil olive from Yallourn);

Pottia willisii G.O.K. Sainsbury (a moss from Standley Chasm, NT), and

Steccherinum willisii M. Geesteranus (a hydroid fungus from Lamington National Park, Queensland).

Jim himself described 64 plant species, two thirds of these as sole author, several new varieties and made many new combinations. In 1958-9 Jim held the position of Australian Botanical Liaison Officer at Kew. In 1964 he was awarded the Australian Natural History Medallion and in 1973 the Royal Society of Victoria Silver Medal for research. In 1974 the Faculty of Science, Monash University appointed him an Honorary Fellow and in 1976 he was appointed a Fellow of the Linnaean Society of London. In June 1995 he became a Member of the Order of Australia.

Jim is survived by his wife Mavis, two sons, three daughters, 15 grandchildren and four great-grandsons.

The breadth and depth of Jim's scientific achievements place him in the front rank of contemporary botanists; he was to the National Herbarium this century what Mueller was in the last, but his many friends and colleagues will remember him most for the simple things; his cheerful personality, welcoming smile and sincere greeting which made one feel a person of value. From eminent scientist to young student, all who sought his advice or help received the same courtesy. With his passing we have lost a true friend*.

*A more detailed biographical sketch of Jim's life and a list of publications was published in 1975 *Muelleria* 3 (2), 69-88. An updated list of publications will appear in the 1997 issue of *Muelleria*.